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The Man on the Junk Heap

By Tuvia Bolton

Once upon a time there was a fabulously rich man named Mr. Farbes. But he was miserable.

He tried everything he could to soothe his misery; he went to doctors but they said he was completely healthy. He took up music, sports, hobbies, dancing, went traveling and even tried meditation but nothing seemed to help; he was bored and depressed.

With no other choice he went to a wise man for advice.

"Your problem," the wise man said "is that you never give charity. You live totally for yourself -- that's why you are miserable. If you want to be happy, begin to help others."

Here was an idea he hadn't thought of! He would give charity and finally he would be free of melancholy. He left the wise man with a new hope.

But he discovered that it wasn't so simple. Giving away money was an entirely new world to him and he didn't know where to begin.

Most of the people that looked poor gave him the feeling that they really weren't. On the other hand, he was certain that there must be many people that really needed money but didn't look it.

He couldn't just give to everyone; if he gave to undeserving people he would not have given charity at all. But on the other hand he had to give or he would go crazy. There must be some way to find out who is really needy.

Suddenly he hit on an idea: He would give only to people that had lost all hope. That, he concluded, was true poverty.

So he put on his coat and began going around to places where unfortunates were to be found: hospitals, orphanages, jails, barrooms, slums. But he had no success at all.

Everyone he spoke to had some hope in life. He met people with problems, diseases, debts, enemies; he met homeless, penniless, jobless, helpless people, but no hopeless people.

He was getting desperate.



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Then, one day as he was walking down some side street he heard moaning coming from the direction of the junk yard. Excitedly he walked in that direction.

There, sitting on a junk heap was a man in ragged clothes, covered with boils and moaning like Job.

"What happened to you?" Farbes asked eagerly.

"Ayyyi, don't ask" the man replied rocking back and forth and holding his head in his hands. "I lost everything, everything! Ooy! My money, my job, my house, friends, family, everything! And now I got these boils! Ayyyi!"

"Tell me," asked the rich man excitedly, "do you still have hope?"

"Hope?" he replied. "What do you mean hope?"

"You know", said the rich man, "hope that things will get better."

"Of course I have hope!" the poor man looked at him wide eyed and replied. "As long as I'm on the ground and the ground isn't on me, I have hope. In the graveyard there's no hope! You're looking for the hopeless? Go to the graveyard."

Now Farbes was really desperate. Would he be doomed to a life of misery? Was there no way he could give money?

Suddenly it occurred to him... He would take the man's advice! He would go to the graveyard and put his money there.

He knew it was a long shot, and it wasn't exactly giving charity either. But at least it was giving! And certainly the money wouldn't fall into the wrong hands.

So that very night at midnight he took a sack of money and a shovel, stealthily snuck into the local cemetery, picked a grave at random, dug a hole, threw the money in, covered it up, and left as secretively as he entered.

As soon as he got home he felt better. It was as though a stone had been lifted from his heart. It didn't make any sense, but what did he care? Finally he was happy. It worked!

A year or two passed and Farbes almost forgot the graveyard incident. But then, as fate would have it, his wheel of fortune took a spin for the worse. Business just wasn't the same as it used to be. He made some bad decisions; small losses brought bigger ones. He was plagued with setback after setback until five years later he was actually approaching bankruptcy and desperately needed some available cash.

Suddenly he remembered the buried money.

It was his last hope. That night he once again furtively crept into the same graveyard carrying the same shovel and sack, found the grave where he had buried the money, and began digging as quietly and quickly as possible in the eerie dim moonlight. A cold wind shook his bones as it whistled through the trees -- he would really be glad to get out of here. Here, in another minute he would be...

"Hands up!" boomed a voice behind him. "Put 'em up and keep 'em up! Police!"

Farbes' knees began shaking and he almost fell over from fright. "Now turn around slowly," the voice boomed again.

He turned to see a huge gun pointed at him with a policeman behind it. "Robbing the dead, eh? How low can you get! Pheh!" said the policeman as he handcuffed poor Farbes.

He tried to explain but he was trembling so uncontrollably all he could say was "No... B-b-but.. I just..." In minutes he was on his way to jail.

A week later he was standing before the judge, a broken man. What once was a wealthy businessman was now a penniless, dingy criminal fresh from a fetid prison cell. The only comfort he had were the words of that man on the junk heap years ago: "As long as I'm on the ground and the ground isn't on me I have hope..."

The officer was testifying.

"Your honor, I caught him red handed. He was digging with a shovel, digging in the graveyard trying to steal from the dead. He even brought that bag into which to put the gold teeth and things."

"What do you have to say for yourself Mr. Farbes?" The Judge turned to him.

"Your honor, it's not so. You see, years ago I buried some money there because I was looking for someone who had no hope. That is, I had to give charity because a Rabbi told me to and I was looking for someone.." Farbes looked at the Judge to see what he was saying was making sense.

"Yes, continue," said the Judge.

"No! No!" Farbes continued. "Well, I met this man who was covered with boils in a junk yard, and he told me to go to the graveyard. So I went there and buried the money and now I need it back again."

"Do you believe that?!" exclaimed the policeman in amazement. "Excuse me your honor, but that is the most crazy, confused lie I've ever heard!"

"Yes, I believe him," said the Judge emphatically. "This man is telling the truth. Release him, he's innocent."

"What, your honor?" said the policeman not believing his ears.

"I said release him. Release him immediately, please."

Back on the street, a bewildered Mr. Farbes struggled to get his bearings. Amidst his joy at his unexpected freedom, something was nagging him at the very rear of his brain. That judge, where had he seen him before? He knew that face from somewhere...

BY TUVIA BOLTON

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